

CROSS WORDS: I – “FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT  
THEY DO”

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Ash Wednesday

Psalms 51:1-17

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

I did something last year that I had never done in my entire life. Oh, it wasn't anything life-changing, or monumental. It wasn't even a really big deal. I just had never done it in my previous 63 years. What was it? I got a manicure. Like I said, no really big deal.

The reason I ended up getting a manicure was that Mom needed one. Her nails had gotten long, and I offered to take her to get a manicure, but she said she would only do it if I would let her pay to get mine done as well. So I did, and just like that I'd had a manicure and I liked it – a lot. It made me feel pampered.

So then people said to me, “Oh, if you like a manicure, you've got to try a pedicure. It's the best.” Well, that wasn't going to happen, because I wasn't going to let anybody see my feet. You see, all of us Bunnells were born with pretty flat feet and have problems because of that.

When I went to the podiatrist one day, I was telling him about it – about how I would never have a pedicure because I didn't want anyone to see my feet, which I told him, I thought were about the ugliest in the world. He reassured me that that wasn't the case, but I didn't really believe him.

Until . . . I caught an episode of a brand new show that started on TLC recently, which is entitled “My Feet are Killing Me.” It took me about ten seconds into the show to realize I, indeed, didn't have the world's ugliest feet.

The people who appear on the show have all kinds of foot problems – some really, really serious and most of them pretty ugly. One episode featured a ballet dancer, whose dancing over the years had taken a terrible toll on both of her feet. Especially the use of the ballet slippers – the toe shoes – really wracked up her feet.

Ironically, this week, I came across an article about Ash Wednesday that was written by a pastor who was also a ballet dancer, and she talked about what it was like to put on those ballet slippers, those toe shoes. Now, if you've seen them, you know that the toe box is flat, so that the dancers can literally dance on their toes.

But what I didn't know was that the toe box is also incredibly slippery, which makes for good spinning, but also can lead to treacherous falls. So, in order to maintain some sense of control, the ballet dancers put rosin dust on the toe boxes of their ballet

shoes. Apparently, every time they are on stage there is a box of rosin dust on the wings on either side, so they can reapply it whenever necessary.

This pastor noted that “the dust of the rosin holds my feet fast, and keeps me from falling on my face.” And then, in an amazing pivot, she says, “likewise the dust of the ashes that are put on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday stop us in our tracks as well.” (Amy Zietlow, “Living By the Word,” Ash Wednesday, *The Christian Century*, 2/26/2020)

Oh, is she ever right! The dust of the ashes placed on our foreheads do stop us in our tracks every year, and remind us of our mortality. You’ll actually hear Ivan say, “From dust you have come and to dust you shall return” as he places them on your forehead.

You know, we tend not to think about our mortality. We just go about our days staying busy and distracted and think we’re going to go on forever, but Ash Wednesday pulls us up short and says, “Not so fast. Life doesn’t go on forever, so take a moment, take 40 days of moments, to see if you’re living the way you should be living, if you’re living as the disciple of Christ you say you are, and if you’re not, to make course corrections now.”

These forty days of Lent are reminiscent of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness when he wrestled with the devil, and surely spent time taking stock of who he was and what he was meant to do. And if we take them seriously, they can be a time of tremendous growth for us, as well.

In a few moments, we’ll have some time in silence to think on the state of our lives, and perhaps lay out some intentions for this season upon which we’re embarking today. We can take this time to ask ourselves if there are things that have taken over our lives that have kept us from being the people God created and called us to be.

Some of us surely have let busyness get in the way of prayer and devotional time with God. For others, perhaps the lure of having more money and accumulating more stuff, has blocked us from giving as fully as we could. Others struggle with things like gossip, while still others battle addictions – addictions with all sorts of names – alcohol, food, drugs, spending, social media, you name it. And many are bound up in unforgiveness – holding grudges against those who have hurt you.

You know, during Lent, I’m preaching a sermon series entitled “Cross Words,” each week dealing with one of Jesus’ seven last words from the cross. Tonight’s word is his first “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Even from the cross, Jesus invites us to give up grudges, to open up our hearts and forgive those who hurt us. If that is your burden, perhaps this Lenten season is the time to let it go.

Friends, only you know what gets in the way of you being the person God created you to be. You know what those things are, we all know our own things. But we stay busy and distract ourselves away from really acknowledging the toll they are taking on our lives and more importantly, our relationship with God and others.

Until Lent comes along, and we receive ashes on our forehead and we're reminded that we don't have forever to make things right. And that might be depressing, except for one thing – and to know that one thing, we need only look at the ashes on our forehead, for they are placed there in the form of a cross. And therein lies our hope.

For the cross is a sign of our salvation in Christ Jesus. The cross is a sign to us that, even as we struggle with who we are and how we're living, even as we recognize our mortality, God in Christ is with us and saves us from our sins. So we can be of good courage as we make this introspective and challenging journey through Lent – because it will lead us to a good place – just as Lent leads to Easter.

You know, recently I've begun clearing things out of the parsonage as I prepare to move from there in a few months. It is, as you might expect after I've lived there for over twenty years, a tedious process. It takes hours to go through things and, to be honest, it's easy to find excuses not to do the work. Oh, but after I've done it, and I've cleared some space, it feels so good. I know I'm moving in the right direction, and things are getting better.

So, in like fashion, I would encourage all of us to take on this journey of Lent with intentionality, to really spend time looking at ourselves, at who we are, how we're living, and what needs to change. May we do that, remembering the sign that we'll bear on our foreheads in just a little while – the cross of Christ – and in remembering may we find courage, strength and hope, knowing that we do not make this Lenten journey alone, but the Christ of Easter goes with us.

So now, I invite all of us to spend an extended period of time in silence, thinking on what we'd like to do in this Lenten season ahead – what we'd like to give up, what we'd like to take on, what we need to do to be more the people God wants us to be. When you've thought about it, write it down on the purple sheet in your bulletin and take it home with you as a reminder. And, if you'd like, if you want to commit your intentions to God, fill out the bottom part of that purple sheet, detach it and then bring it up to the altar rail when you come forward for communion and the imposition of ashes and leave it there before God

So now, let us be in silence and pray on our intentions for Lent.